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# NOTES

## ONTARIO SCHOOL BOARD REDUCTION TASK FORCE REPORT

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### INTRODUCTION

The Ontario School Board Reduction Task Force, chaired by former Liberal Minister John Sweeney, was established in February 1995 with a mandate to make recommendations on reducing the number of boards by 40-50%, on trustee representation and on streamlining French-language education. Strict parameters were set out: boards were to be recognized as the basic education governance structure and Catholic and Francophone constitutional rights to govern their own education were to be protected.<sup>1</sup>

After considerable public consultation and an interim report, the Sweeney Task Force issued its final report in February 1996. Its recommendations on amalgamating school boards, managing education with reduced funds, and education finance address issues central to current debates on education reform in Ontario. This note briefly summarizes these key recommendations.

There are currently 168 public and separate school boards, including four French-language boards and 74 French-language sections or advisory committees within boards. Within

broad frameworks set by the province, boards establish local policy, employ teachers and other education staff, develop curricula and determine program mix and budgets.

### AMALGAMATING BOARDS

The Sweeney Task Force recommended that:

- the 168 boards be amalgamated into 87 (the Task Force set out detailed maps on the proposed new boundaries):
  - 44 public English-language boards;
  - 28 separate English boards;
  - 5 public and 10 separate French-language boards, which would replace existing boards, sections and advisory committees.
- trustee representation be based on enrollment (they set out a formula whereby boards with enrollment under 30,000 would have 7 trustees, ranging to those with over 90,000 having 13);
- minimum and maximum trustee honoraria be \$5,000 and \$15,000;
- board expenditure on operational and administrative support be limited to less than 40% of their budgets (the Task Force also

<sup>1</sup> Ontario, Ontario School Board Reduction Task Force (John Sweeney, Chair), *Final Report* (Toronto: Queen's Printer, 1996): 25-28.

- recommended a formula for the appropriate number of administrative and other support staff based on enrollment); and
- mechanisms to deal with surplus administrative staff and interim governance be created.

## SAVINGS

The Task Force argued that significant savings could be achieved with amalgamation through:

- lower levels of administrative staffing;
- reduced need for central office facilities; and
- enhanced collaboration between boards.

While it could not arrive at precise figures for the latter two factors, the Task Force did estimate that over \$107 million could be saved through lower numbers of administrative and operational staff and trustees. It argued that “any savings redirected to the classroom will help sustain educational programs that would otherwise face severe cuts.” (p. 67)

## Cooperation Among Boards

There has been increasing emphasis on boards’ sharing bus routes, computer systems, purchasing, payroll and benefits, and other administrative resources. The Task Force recommended that boards be required to form consortia to manage services.

The previous government introduced legislation that would have required cooperation and the current government passed Bill 34 in June, which gives a clear mandate to establish cooperative agreements between boards and other institutions and requires boards to report annually on these efforts.

## Collective Bargaining

The Report rejected previous amalgamation studies’ conclusions that “any savings would be used up in the harmonization of collective bargaining...” and argued that “harmonization cannot take the form of raising all staff members to the highest level of the pay scale.” (p. 67)

- It recommended that province-wide negotiation with teachers be permitted. The newly amalgamated boards should be empowered to negotiate with non-teachers; the pool of money for negotiating with each employee group should be limited to the total amount of the contracts with that employee group in the pre-existing boards.
- The Task Force also recommended that provisions for paying retirement gratuities based on unused sick days be honoured but limited to one-half of an employee’s 1995-96 salary, and that new contracts not contain such provisions. Bill 34 removed provisions on retirement gratuities for unused sick days from the *Education Act*; they will now be the subject of collective bargaining.

## EDUCATION FUNDING

The Report concluded “that reform of education finance is even more essential than reform of education governance...” (p. 25) and argued that its recommended governance changes “are impossible without the **prior or simultaneous** reform of education finance.” (p. 19, its emphasis)

The Task Force joined many other reports in concluding that inequitable access to assessment was a major problem. It recommended province-wide pooling of commercial and industrial assessment with a standard mill rate, and provincial redistribution of this assessment to ensure all boards have equitable amounts of direct classroom expenditure per pupil.



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